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Putting refugees at the centre of resettlement in the UK

Michael Collyer, Rupert Brown, Linda Morrice and Linda Tip

There are growing numbers of refugees in the UK who have been through a resettlement programme. New research in four UK cities highlights opportunities to incorporate the refugees' expertise into programme design.

The United Kingdom's contribution to refugee resettlement has increased substantially in recent years, although from a relatively low base. This contrasts sharply with the highly restrictionist stance of virtually every other aspect of UK policy towards migrants and refugees, including asylum. In 2015, the government expanded the quota of 750 refugees arriving under the established Gateway Protection Programme (GPP) with an additional 4,000 refugees a year under the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) Programme. There are also a number of other programmes, mostly focused on resettling or relocating vulnerable children.

The first refugees resettled through the GPP arrived in 2004. There are now several thousand people in the UK who have been through a refugee resettlement programme, many of them now with long experience of life in the UK. The recent expansion of VPR, the introduction of new programmes and the continued refinement of the GPP provide a real opportunity to incorporate refugees' own expertise into the development of new programmes. There is no evidence at the moment that the UK government is considering this in any systematic way, though there are plenty of examples of how effective it can be, such as the SHARE Network's Resettlement Ambassador Programme.¹

Our research project, entitled Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, set out to put refugees at the centre of resettlement research. The research involved 11 peer researchers – that is, resettled refugees – from the cities where the research would happen. At three intervals (one year apart) from 2014 to 2016, using a survey and interviews they investigated determinants

of well-being for resettled refugees who had arrived in the UK before 2010.

280 resettled refugees were involved, 180 of whom completed all three surveys, giving detailed longitudinal information on the well-being of refugees resettled to the UK, some time after their arrival.² Eight of the peer group researchers attended the final conference on the research findings. Four of the themes that emerged were:

- difficulties with education and employment
- the central importance of English language ability
- the role of pre-departure orientation
- the interaction between refugee status, citizenship and belonging.

Education and employment

Charles, a 28-year-old originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), described his achievements in getting a job and subsequently receiving a degree:

"I applied for a cleaning job. Then I did an interview. I had a suit, you know. Then they said, right off, that I don't have experience – for a cleaning job! Then I said [to myself] this will be the first and the last time that I will apply for this type of job. I was really upset. ... I applied for another job. I managed to get a social care job. I got a job as a support worker. That was in September 2010. We arrived in March, and six months later I was working. Actually, I was the first person in our group to work."

"The only advantage really which I thought about getting to Europe [for] was education. I was saying, you know, this is a great opportunity. African [government] ministers, they send their kids to

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Europe to study. So I had this opportunity to go and study. All I had in my mind was education [but] no one really wanted to know what you wanted to do in terms of education, or in terms of your future career. That was not part of the package, because, you know, they see refugees as one big category."

Charles was able to overcome the barriers to education, eventually getting a degree. Nevertheless, he was concerned that the channelling of refugees into particular sectors has serious long-term implications:

"We have a problem which really hurts me a lot. Seventy maybe eighty per cent of refugees are working as care support workers. What is the future of this community? Who is the role model?"

English language ability

Even English language education was hard to access, beyond the two hours a week provided. Our research findings showed the fundamental importance of English language ability to refugees' well-being, so this is a particularly surprising omission. Those who were successful were those who were proactive in identifying and accessing other classes that were not provided specifically for refugees. Suzanne, a 36-year-old woman, originally from DRC:

"We started looking at other places like the Community Centre, where we can go and learn English. So we went on Mondays to the college because Monday is the day they give us to go and learn English. We went to another one in the Community Centre, and another one we found in [...] Castle Museum. We just went wherever [there] was English!"

Disappointment and frustration with the limited opportunities to learn English were common to most resettled refugees. This influenced attempts to find work and education more generally. Eremias, a 36-year-old originally from Ethiopia, had established a flourishing social enterprise, yet he was clear that this was contrary to the direction that he was initially pushed in:

"Some people come here as a doctor or a lawyer [or] a teacher. That is their background. They were respected! But they come here, and they have their

CV with those skills, but the Job Centre is telling them, "Go for a cleaning job, and clean the toilet."

He also expressed a real feeling of disappointment that refugees resettled to the UK when they are older, beyond standard university age, are not able to access the UK's further or higher education system in the same way.

Ali, originally from Somalia but who had grown up in Kenya, was confused about the recognition of his qualifications in the UK:

"My worst experience was the education system when I tried to attend a college, or access a course. I submitted all my papers from Kenya, including my advanced, first certificate diploma from Nairobi University... I submitted everything and they said to leave the diploma outside because they said it was unacceptable because they are not qualifications from an English university. I said, "What?!""

Pre-departure orientation

These things were not effectively explained during the pre-departure orientation. Over the years, the pre-departure orientation had progressively been dramatically cut, from the two full weeks provided when the GPP was first established to a mere three hours by 2016. Our research highlighted the importance of realistic expectations to well-being later on. Many refugees were bemused at the orientation they received; Suzanne remembered one particular piece of information:

"They told us about people who are here, what their culture is like. They showed some films. They taught us how clean it is here, [compared] to where we were in Africa. They even said "British people, they don't greet." Where we were, we greet everyone! And we welcome everyone! They said to just be aware, don't just go and greet or else you will be disappointed. So they said, "Just smile, so, you should learn how to smile!" And this teacher, I really remember her, she lined us up and tried to teach us how to smile."

All of the peer researchers highlighted how much help they thought they could give if they were invited to teach on these pre-departure sessions. The current total of three hours is only enough to explain what would



UNHCR/H Davies

English classes for refugees from Ethiopia who came to the UK in 2006 and were resettled in Brighton on the south coast under the Gateway Protection Programme.

happen on the flight whereas longer sessions have a demonstrable impact, even years after arrival. The opportunity to speak to someone who went through that experience a decade or more earlier would be of tremendous long-term benefit and yet is rarely even discussed.

Kess was the only peer researcher on the project who had come to the UK at school age. She had enjoyed relatively easy, direct access to the education system, simply because she was the right age, though there were still things that surprised her:

"Just little things like wearing a uniform and showing respect to the teacher. I'd never in my life heard someone speak back to the teacher. When they did it here, it was quite a shock."

Refugee status, citizenship and belonging

Arriving at a younger age obviously makes it much easier to feel part of the UK. Unlike her parents, Kess speaks English easily and perfectly, with no trace of a foreign accent. Yet, even though she now has British citizenship, being a refugee remains relevant to her at certain moments:

"I think being a refugee is in the background – it's part of your mind, of yourself. But, as far as I'm concerned, I don't view myself as a refugee. So

when I'm out applying for jobs or university, I don't go and say I'm a refugee. I just do whatever anyone is doing. But it's quite hard to forget you're a refugee sometimes. ... But no, I don't view myself as a refugee, but I do view that as part of myself."

In the UK, resettled refugees can claim citizenship after being in the country for five years. Our research, with the initial survey occurring at least four years after people had arrived and the final survey at least six years after, covered the time at which they became eligible for naturalisation. By the end of the research, the large majority had attained British citizenship, though opinions varied about the extent to which being a refugee still mattered. Charles suggested that it was at times when he was really struggling that he resented the refugee label, and when things improved, that changed:

"If you are going through a very difficult situation, like you can't access education, you can't pass the test about life in the UK, or your English is very poor, I think being a refugee would always be painful. But if things are going well, for me I'm proud to be a refugee. I'm really proud to be a refugee."

Similarly, Eremias also recognised that negative associations with the status of

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refugee made it a more difficult status to claim:

“Not because being a refugee is bad, but being a refugee, or how a refugee is treated in terms of education or if you want to go to university, or if you want to be employed ... because you come from a different country, you know it’s not easy to get a job. For that reason, that mentality is in our mind, and for that reason people don’t want to be categorised as a refugee.”

For Eremias, everything was linked. The difficulties encountered in finding employment or education and struggles with learning English were inevitably tied up with how it feels to be a refugee. This was an important reason why he rejected the label. Yet he concluded:

“Most of the time, we – refugees – came here with empty pockets, but not empty minds. If we get a lot of support and opportunity, we can deliver a lot as well.”



It is still relatively unusual for research to recognise refugees’ expertise. There are even fewer examples of where refugees are placed at the centre of planning refugee resettlement programmes. Yet there are obvious benefits to doing so.

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1. <http://bit.ly/SHARE-Resettlement-Ambassador>
2. Initial results are available on the project website www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/refugeeresettlement. There is also a series of blog posts based on invited presentations at the final conference, held at the University of Sussex, September 2016.